

# Aggression

## By Brenda Howard

“My dog is scaring me because he won’t let me take a toy from him.” This is a call I receive frequently. Is a dog that will not let you take a toy from him an aggressive dog? Well he is displaying an aggressive resistance to your taking the toy isn’t he!

A dog that is guarding a possession by growling, barring his teeth, or barking is doing what comes naturally to dogs. He is protecting what he perceives to be his. This dog is telling you that the item is HIS. This guarding behavior is called “resource guarding.” Dogs can perceive many things as resources to guard – a few examples are their water bowl, bed, toys, chews, food bowl, yard, car or truck, house, persons, other dogs, or other animals. The problem is that we need to be able to take things from our dogs. We need to be able to pick up a food bowl, take away a bone, or retrieve the Barbie doll!

Aggressive behavior is generally an effort of the dog to control a resource or situation that can’t be controlled through other means. All of this is considered “dominance.” And what is dominance? It is to rule, command or control a thing or a being. What are other types of aggression? A lot of folks think dominance is literally one dog trying to beat up on another dog. While it can be that, “dominance” is just another way to describe most aggressive behavior.

Some animal behaviorists have categorized aggression into three general types – threat, defense and attack. These three categories can be further defined by a wide variety of aggressive behaviors that are triggered by various factors and include:

Fear induced aggression is preceded by efforts to escape a threatening situation. This is the documented response of both man and dog to fear – the first option is to flee and when escape is not available then the second option of fight is used. Avoidance is the motivation for fear biting when flight is not available.

Control related aggression is seen in dogs that lack appropriate boundaries and have not learned proper social inhibitions. Often dogs removed from their homes too early display this type of aggressive behavior. Young puppies learn from each other to inhibit biting and other “over the top” aggression.

Irritable aggression is the behavior response to pain, frustration, deprivation and other stress. A dog in pain may bite or exhibit warning signs such as barring of teeth or growling. If pain is the trigger, hopefully the dog can be relieved of the pain by a visit to the veterinarian.

Territorial aggression is another form of resource guarding. Dogs that are trained for guard work are operating under territorial aggression and will defend and protect a given area from the intrusion of strangers.

Maternal aggression is seen in females protecting their puppies from strangers. Some females will kill their young if the perceived threat is too great.

Possessive aggression is resource guarding – the resource may be a room, a yard, a toy, a food bowl or even a person.

Redirected aggression is seen often when an owner is bitten while trying to break up a fight between dogs. This is what happens when the adrenalin is so high in a dog that it will bite you instead of the intended target blocked

by your arm!

Playful aggression is what puppies and young dogs engage in. This type of aggression does not result in injury. Many young dogs will display this same type of mouthing and jumping on their owners.

Idiopathic or Pathophysiological aggression is triggered by physiological issues like an over active thyroid. There are many medical reasons why a dog may be displaying aggression that do not result in pain. A complete medical screening from a veterinarian is needed to correctly diagnose the underlying problem.

Male on male aggression is evoked by the presence of another male dog. This behavior is seen most commonly in non-neutered males.

Stress hormones measured by cortisol levels play a role in aggression as well as the sex hormones of estrogen, testosterone and progesterone. This is well documented by researchers and is the basis for the recommendations of most veterinarians that spay and neutering can be helpful in affecting unwanted behaviors in both male and female dogs.

There is a very strong heritable factor that affects aggression in dogs. Numerous studies have identified the genetic link between increased fearful behaviors and aggression. Quality breeders know this and therefore consider carefully the temperament of their dogs before breeding and choose individuals that display pleasing solid temperaments.

Wow – there’s a lot to know and understand about what causes a dog to behave in an aggressive manner! What to do about that dog that won’t let its owner take the toy? Training. Training. Training. Through training most dogs will learn the behaviors required by them to live happily and at peace in your home. Training through positive reinforcement will teach the dog that “good things” happen when it “behaves.”

Please do not hit your dog. If you feel that your dog is displaying aggressive behavior in any given situation seek help. Learn what to do to help your dog exist among 2-leggers. A good trainer will help you learn more about how dog’s process information, how they learn, and how to make your communications with your dog more pleasing for both of you.

Consult your veterinarian if you believe your dog is acting badly “for no reason.”

Brenda Howard has been training dogs for over 20 years and is a member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, The American Bloodhound Club, The Basset Hound Club of America and The Pet Care Services Association (formerly the ABKA).

The information presented here is not intended to substitute for the advice and care of a veterinarian. Consult your veterinarian regarding all issues relating to your dog’s health.

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